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ABSTRACT

The audio-lingual method of foreign language instruction predominant in the United States emphasizes the lingual at the expense of the aural. Language acquisition is viewed as verbal behavior. Instead of a response-oriented learning approach, a stimulus-oriented one should be used, with listening as the focal skill from which speaking would naturally grow. Studies show that delaying oral response while providing prevocal aural training improves the proficiency of speaking once it is begun. The focus on speech in foreign language teaching has concentrated attention on dramatic behavior changes rather than on thinking and understanding. (EMH)

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SHUT-UP AND LISTEN, A CASE FOR LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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For well over a decade, most foreign language instruction in the U.S. has adhered more or less to the "audio-lingual" methodology. This production-oriented methodology is based on the assumption that language, as habitual verbal behavior, is best acquired through oral practice, i.e., speaking with intensive pattern drills, dialogue memorization and other habit forming exercises. In practice, the "audio-lingual methodology has consistently stressed the lingual at the expense of the audio. Active oral drills have received far more attention than aural comprehension. Audio-lingual teachers are admonished to maximize each student's active oral (speech) opportunities in class recitation.

The "audio-lingual" methodology has not been proven completely successful. Attacks from transformational linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, have created doubts in the minds of many teachers of foreign language. The cogni.ive-code learning approach was cited by Carroll[1] as an alternative. Unfortunately, as pointed out by Postovsky, "...some proponents of the cognitive theory of language acquisition, while rejecting the mechanistic approach to language teaching, still adhere to the behavioristic view of language as a phenomenon. To them, language is still 'talk.' It may be defined as 'communicative competence and performance,' but conceptually it is exactly the same as verbal behavior. It logically follows from this essentially behavioristic premise that language learning is equivalent to learning to talk."[2]

It is, I believe, time we revised the emphasis, the focus of attention. Now is the time to shift from practice to theory, to focus on "understanding" instead of "doing."[3] It is time to shift from a response-oriented learning approach to a stimulus-oriented learning approach.[4] It is time we considered listening as the primary focal skill; and allow speaking to grow naturally as a resulting product. It is time we told our foreign language students to "Shut up and listen!"

Over ten years ago, Belasco said, "Aural comprehension is the most underestimated and least understood aspect of foreign language learning today."[5] It is still true today. Asher has recommended that "...for at least one semester in college or six months to a year in high school, the goal of foreign language learning should be listening fluency only."[6] The listening fluency should be so keen that when the student visits Mexico, he can understand almost anything he hears on the street, on television, or on the radio. When this level of comprehension is achieved, the student may be ready for a graceful transition to speaking Spanish. Winitz and Reed completely agree with this position.[7] For those who are strongly response-oriented, who believe that some sort of speech training is required to learn correct speech, Winitz is clear and uncompromising. "One may ask, is speech production not taught at all? Our answer is an emphatic yes."[8] He makes a clear distinction between allowing students to speak and forcing students to speak. "Speech should be responded to appropriately by clinicians since language will often be used by children to indicate understanding...However, we do not recommend mimicry, pattern drills or chaining of words as clinical techniques."[9]

The requirement to respond orally, as in the mimicry-memorization drills of the audio-lingual approach, imposes listening for speaking and it results in impaired listening comprehension. This problem was treated in a short experiment by James Asher and it involved the performance of drill movements by commands in Russian.

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Asher found that the students who merely performed the commands did so with a greater degree of reliability than those who first repeated the commands orally before performing the necessary movement. He concluded that, "...the stress of trying to pronounce the alien utterance may retard listening fluency....The optimal strategy may be serial learning in which one achieves listening fluency just before one attempts to speak."[10] There is other experimental support for this same position. In a study on the associative reaction time in language acquisition, Ley and Locascio state: "Our research suggests that one must make associations to verbal materials during learning in order that the material can be later recalled, and that some procedure such as repeatedly saying the material aloud interferes with the associative process, and therefore has a detrimental effect on learning."[11]

Part of the explanation for these results may be the role that stress and anxiety play in the learning process. Anxiety, often brought on by task overload, can be a major deterent to the learning of listening comprehension. The effect of anxiety on learning in general has been widely studied. Eysenck points out that "...conditioning is related to anxiety for the simple reason that it has been shown conclusively that the ease with which a conditioned reflex is formed depends very much on the anxiety of the person on whom the experiment is being performed. What is more, there is a good deal of what is called 'stimulus generalization' in the anxious person."[12] Any discrimination learning is much more difficult with the anxious person. Therefore, any receptive skill, such as listening comprehension and reading, which is primarily discrimination learning, is made more difficult through task overload and the corresponding anxiety which is created.

There are a number of studies which indicate that forcing a student to respond orally, to speak before he has a good foundation, before he is ready, is a major cause of poor pronunciation, accents and poor grammatical control. This generally results from practicing speaking while task overloaded. Even imitation is a very complex task and can create task overload. "At a minimum, it can be shown that imitation requires perception, storage, organization of output, and motor output. In addition, before the storage phase there will be interpretation if the material is interpretable."[13]

In a study which reviewed a large number of experimental reports within the aerospace industry, Greer et al., point out that when a subject is task overloaded, errors increase and there is a tendency to revert to previously learned generalizations rather than make the specific distinctions required at that point.[14] As Gaier has expressed it, "...it leads to an impairment in the ability to improvise in an unstructured and/or new situation. This results in stereotyped, habitual and familiar approaches that may be maladaptive in the situation."[15] In foreign language learning, this means that as a person <u>becomes</u> task overloaded by trying to speak and say more than he is able to, he will revert back to the habit formations he knows best, his native tongue. The results are speaking the words of the new language with sound habits and/or grammatical patterns of the old language. If done often enough in this state of task overload, they become habits transferred to the new language.

There is evidence that the delay of oral response in the initial stages of foreign language learning actually improves the proficiency of speaking once it is commenced, <u>provided that the pre-vocal period is devoted to training in aural comprehension</u>. Postovsky challenged the assumption that the initial phase of instruction should be based on intensive oral practice, that the more vocally active the student is from the beginning, the faster he learns the foreign language. Instead, he proposed that the motor skill involved in the production of speech output is an end result of complex and mostly covert processes which constitute linguistic competence. He further proposed that, "...the linguistic competence includes at least two reciprocally correlated events: capacity to <u>process</u> auditory input and

capacity to generate speech output..."[16] The former he indicates is concerned with decoding capability which requires the development of recognition knowledge, while the latter is concerned with encoding capability which requires development of the retrieval knowledge. He felt that it was logical to assume that the development of recognition knowledge should precede, not follow, the development of retrieval knowledge.

In attempting to use a stimulus-oriented approach to language learning, Postovsky decided to test the effect of replacing oral response (speaking) with written response during the first four weeks of the Defense Language Institute's Russian course.[17] In all, there were about 100 experimental students and 100 control students, none of whom had any previous exposure to Russian. The only difference in the experimental procedure was to delay the introduction of oral practice until after the fourth week or approximately 120 contact hours with the language in this intensive course. Instead of pronunciation practice, instead of engaging in oral pattern response drills, the experimental students responded during the four week pre-vocal phase entirely in writing.

After four weeks, the experimental group commenced oral drill and the methodology for both the experimental and the control groups was identical. At the end of six weeks and twelve weeks, tests were administered to the students from both groups to measure the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. On the basis of these tests, Postovsky was able to make the following conclusions:

1. In learning Russian, adult students develop better overall language proficiency when oral practice is delayed in the initial phase of instruction, provided however, that this pre-vocal period is devoted to training in aural comprehension and written practice from spoken input.
2. There is high positive transfer of learning from writing to speaking, provided again that written practice is from spoken output.
3. In the initial phase of instruction, when written practice from spoken input is compared with oral practice of the same drill material, written practice develops better control of grammatical structure.
4. Introduction of writing system (Cyrillic alphabet) prior to intensive pronunciation practice does not create a greater problem of graphic inference than the reverse sequence of presentation normally creates.[18]

There is other evidence that learning the receptive skill of listening comprehension has high transfer value to the other skills. In an experiment focused on listening comprehension of German, Asher required no speaking whatsoever.[19] Instead, he required the students to respond to oral stimuli with a movement of the body. For example, the student was told: "Go to the table and pick up the mirror!" The requests started simply and were first modelled by the instructor. Later, the vocabulary and structure became more complex. Some vocabulary, particularly abstract words were written on cards and manipulated as objects. Asher noted that after 16 hours of instruction, the students on their own volition pressed the instructor to let them speak. Once listening comprehension was achieved, transfer to the speaking skill was rapid. Transfer to the other skills was also rapid. In regard to reading, Asher noted:

> Although the experimental subjects far excelled the controls in listening skills, it was expected that perhaps the reverse would be true for reading skill. Since the training emphasis of the control group was reading and writing, we expected these students to have significantly higher reading comprehension scores. The results, using a 37 item reading test, showed no significant difference between groups. Surprisingly, even though the experimental subjects had no systematic training in reading, there was enough positive transfer from listening skill to make both groups quite similar in their reading achievement.[20]

What appears to be active here is transfer based upon the general phenomenon known as stimulus pre-differentiation.[21] One study in music illustrates the transfer process.[22] Studies by Asher[23] attest to the power of a stimulus-oriented approach with its transfer potential to other skills, particularly to speaking in foreign language teaching.

In a less formal experiment at Michigan State University, similar conclusions were reached as a result of focusing the initial learning on listening comprehension and delaying the oral response until students were ready. In an intensive Russian course[24] with twenty students, nine hours per week, for thirty weeks, and using a variety of alternative response modes such as total physical response, written response, and a new technique called the Sens-it Cell,[25] we came up with some interesting but not surprising findings. The test results indicated that listening comprehension was greater for the experimental group than for the control groups. Test results for the other three skills were about the same for all groups, experimental and control. Drop out rate was reduced to 25 percent which was much better than the comparision group. And in addition, we received quite favorable student feedback such as:

> I have no propensity for foreign languages. I took four years of high school Spanish without learning a thing. This year, I have learned more Russian than I'll ever know Spanish...(in this class) you learn without realizing how much you learn. Then, you see how far ahead of the standard Russian course you are. The people in the standard class are being bored into inactivity.[26]

The evidence supporting a stimulus-oriented approach for foreign language teaching seems to be growing and in little danger of refutation. I think it is by now quite clear that the foreign language teacher can legitimately tell the students to "Shut up and listen." It is the wider implication to the field of educational technology in general which may appear speculative. But I believe, even here, there is fertile ground for investigation. I believe it is particularly important for those of us who grew up, were nurtured and believed in a stimulus-oriented audiovisual world, to stop "doing things" for a minute and try "to understand" the implications of a stimulus-oriented learning approach.

In several studies outside of language teaching, there is evidence that discrimination training can be used in place of response practice to help shorten the total learning time. For example, in one research study,[27] the researcher believed that teaching the students to observe more accurately would help them guide their own behavior. He gave preschool children practice in discriminating well-formed numbers from those which were badly formed. It was found that these children were able to write the numbers well, much sooner than those who had been given either response guidance or response practice from the beginning. Similar techniques have been used to teach machine operations.[28] By using discrimination training to show proper equipment setup, the students first learned the proper appearance of the outcome and thus were able to monitor their own behavior in acquiring the skill. This same procedure has also been applied to problem-solving in mathematics.[29] This technique allows the student to interact with the uniqueness of each problem and avoid the redundancy of problem solving, thus reducing long response practices and reducing overall time of learning. This stimulus-oriented approach is the heart of the world famous Suzuki Violin Method.[30] It is necessary at some time for the student to actually respond, write the number, operate the machine, solve the problem, or play the violin if that is a desired goal; but in most cases the opportunity to engage in a response practice phase becomes a rewarding activity allowing the student to demonstrate his newly acquired skills.

What is emerging from an analysis of these experiments is a recognition that we need to relook at the controversy between "theory" and "practice," "doing" and

"understanding,"[31] between a stimulus-oriented approach to learning as opposed to a response-oriented approach.[32] In response-oriented learning, learning occurs as a result of a response. There is no learning without that response. Learning is basically defined as "a change in behavior." While technically response can be covert (nonpublic), in most cases the teacher and the public assume that this means overt or public behavior. Response-oriented learning with its emphasis on performance or public behavioral response is very popular in the United States. The phrase "learn by doing" is almost a sacred statement. The word understanding is rejected as unfit for "behavioral" objectives. In our "practical" world, "theory" is often belittled. But the word theory is derived from a Greek word meaning "to look at." It is a stimulus-oriented word.

For a stimulus-oriented approach, performance or a motor response is not considered essential to learning as in the response-oriented approach. Performance is considered the product or indicator of learning. The learning itself occurs when perceived stimuli become related to each other. Learning a language is assumed to occur when the sound patterns of the language become related to each other phonetically and grammatically as well as related to other stimuli or stimuli traces semantically. In teaching foreign languages by a stimulus-oriented approach, speaking is not required to learn speaking. Speaking is seen as an overt demonstration that the language was in fact learned.

In teaching with a stimulus-oriented approach, accurate observation is taught to serve as a self-monitoring guide to overt behavior. When a student first learns to observe (listen to) the correct speech patterns, then he seems to be able to do (speak) those correct speech patterns sooner, and with better pronunciation and grammatical control than those students who practice speaking from the beginning. Behavior is seen as a way of controlling one's perception,[33] constructing sound patterns to match those which are anticipated by the ear.

The focus on speaking in language instruction has, I believe, been detrimental to the field. It has been detrimental not just because it now appears less effective and efficient, but rather because of its possible corruptive effect. By concentrating public and professional attention on dramatic overt behavioral changes, which could be observed by anyone, the focus on speaking has also succeeded in diverting attention away from the far more elusive, but far more fundamental changes that are going on inside the mind as one learns to "listen" and "think" in a foreign language. The focus on learning to speak has diverted attention, research, and money away from development of theories, methodologies and instructional materials for learning aural comprehension.

In the larger context of educational technology, the focus on response oriented learning during the past 10-15 years, may well have diverted much needed attention, research and money away from the development of theories, methodologies and instructional materials utilizing a stimulus oriented approach. The extensive attention paid to the response-oriented learning approaches, the generally held beliefs that the student had to respond overtly in order to learn, may well have held in check the potential power of pure stimulus tools such as radio, film, and TV.

Now, in a final response to my own advice, I too, would like to shut up and listen. Listen to your response, to your comments, to your data. If you can provide me with corroborating or conflicting evidence, not just opinion, I would be most pleased to listen. If you the listener, speak back, I promise to listen.

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